Application for Addition of a New Artwork on the Minnesota Capitol Grounds

Application Information Part I - Applicant Contact Information

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Part 2 – Subject of the Artwork
What is the subject of the proposed commemorative artwork? (Please describe.)

A commemorative marker to note the site of a historic baseball park, which was used from 1903 to 1910 by the St. Paul Saints minor-league team and as a frequent home of a significant all-Black team, the St. Paul Gophers (also called the St. Paul Colored Gophers). The Downtown Base Ball Park was also known as The Pillbox because of its small size. The ballpark was on the northwest corner of 12th and Robert, on the site now occupied by the laboratory building for the Minnesota departments of Health and Agriculture. The stands faced the capitol and in its early years, people got to enjoy baseball while also watching the construction of the capitol rotunda.

Around the turn of the 20th century, baseball parks were usually placed in core parts of the cities and, by design or not, became part of the urban core. The shapes and sizes of the structure were dictated by the land available and limited to the confines of a city block. Much later the developers, more often public entities, had the clout to have areas widened and streets reconfigured, something that was the case with the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in the 1980s. However, private interests were behind the ballparks more than 100 years ago and had to deal with existing restrictions vis a vis location and site constraints.

Access to public transportation was a key in where they were sited. For example, in Minneapolis the minor-league team (known as the Millers) played in a small ballpark a block north of Hennepin Avenue in downtown. During the 1896 season, the land on which the park stood had been sold and they were given 30 days to find a new home. A location along Kenwood Boulevard, across Hennepin Avenue from Loring Park, was considered the favorite. The city council, however, refused to vacate certain streets in the Kenwood area, and in late May, after the streetcar company announced it could better service a park near Lake Street, the decision was made to locate the field at 31st Street and Nicollet Avenue. The ground was quickly graded, bleachers, grandstands, and fences hastily erected, and within three weeks the field was ready for baseball.

The Minneapolis experience also exemplifies the political machinations involved as well as the simplicity of the ballparks, wooden structures that could be erected quickly. St. Paul dealt with these characteristics in finding homes for its minor-league teams, along with other challenges. In the 1880s and 1890s, the team played in two locations on the West Side Flats, the area across the Mississippi River to the south of downtown. The area was prone to flooding and the ballparks were sometimes unavailable because they were under water.

In the mid-1890s a new team owned by Charles Comiskey (one that Comiskey later moved to Chicago and that still exists as the White Sox) began with Comiskey building a small ballpark near University Avenue and Dale Street. Here the challenge was the ability to play on Sundays. Churches in the area objected to such entertainment on the Sabbath. Comiskey responded by getting a new ballpark built on the southwest corner of University Avenue and Lexington Parkway.

In many ways, Lexington Base Ball Park (which now has a commemorative plaque on the site) was a departure from existing characteristics for ballparks, here as well as around the country. It was on a spacious site outside the core area. While it was well served by public transportation, it was approximately three miles from downtown St. Paul, which was then considered a sizable distance.

By 1902 St. Paul's team was in a new league, under different ownership, and the operators desired a closer location. George Lennon, the team president, was being pressured by other league owners to move the Saints because of low attendance, which was blamed on the distance from downtown to Lexington Park. Lennon refused to move, but, as a compromise, he agreed to build a new ballpark in or near downtown.

His original plan for a ballpark to the southeast of Central Park and within view of the under-construction state capitol, was shelved when the board of aldermen rejected Lennon's request to build a frame structure within the city's fire limits.

Lennon pursued other options, including property off Rice Street between University and Como avenues, to the northwest of the capitol as well as aa return to the West Side, to the east of the approach for the Wabasha Street Bridge. Nothing worked. Property owners in the Rice and Como area objected to the vacating of sections of streets. A railway company had a claim on the property at the base of the Wabasha Bridge. A local official suggested another site, on Harriet Island in the Mississippi River between downtown and the West Side, but the timing wasn't ideal – the island was underwater.

The Saints were back at Lexington Park for their 1903 home opener on May 1, not where they wanted to be but at least still in St. Paul. The good news for local fans got even better within a week when the board of aldermen amended the ordinance regulating the erection of frame structures within the fire district. The action opened the way for a new ballpark. Construction began almost immediately, and barely two months later, a new ballpark opened on the corner of 12th and Minnesota streets. With home plate in the southeast corner, fans in the grandstand watched games while also observing the construction of the state capitol's rotunda, which was completed in 1905.

Officially the Downtown Ball Park, it was more commonly referred to as the Pillbox because of its small size. Researcher Jim Hinman said the distances from home plate were about 210 feet down the right-field line and 280 down the left-field line, adding, "Grandstand and bleachers were protected from balls by netting, essentially caging the fans in. A fire during a game would have been disastrous. . . . The size of the lot forced an unusual style of play and numerous ground rules, and necessitated stands that were extremely close to the field. Home plate was so close to the grandstand that it could barely be seen from many seats."

"The 'pill-box' was not a thing of beauty," according to an article by the Junior Pioneer Association of Ramsey County. "The right fielder played with his back against the fence, and was only a few feet behind the second baseman even then. A 3-bagger was practically unknown, and would only result from a ball taking a freak bounce off a fence post or thru some other accident. There were plenty of 2-base hits due to special ground rules; balls hit over the right and left field fences counted for two bases, and home runs were scored only over a limited area of the center field fence. . . . The papers often noted the players being 'ankle deep in the mire' in bad weather, and sand being sprinkled on the baselines to provide better footing."

As with other ballparks of the period, the Pillbox was constructed quickly, and a sellout crowd of 4,500 was on hand for the first game July 21, 1903. More fans watched from the roofs of adjacent buildings, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported, "Roof parties in the vicinity of the ball park promise to be very popular."

The Pillbox worked for the team, at least Monday through Saturday. The board of aldermen had approved the new ballpark with a pledge from Lennon for no Sunday games to placate nearby churches. The Saints went back to Lexington Park on Sundays, although a problem arose in 1907 when the Saints were outbid by

an amateur team to play at Lexington Park on Sundays. The Saints were able to get permission to play a Sunday game at the downtown park. The Saints saw it as an experiment to allay the fears of neighbors that Sunday baseball was too disruptive. For the game fans were asked to refrain from "undue shouting" to reduce noise, and the crowd was described as "orderly" for that Sunday game. Nevertheless, the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, across the street from the left-field corner of the Pillbox, claimed that the noise interfered with their afternoon service and sought an injunction to prevent further Sunday games. It was clear to the Saints that they would not win over their neighbors. They were eventually able to regain their Sunday lease at Lexington Park and in 1910 decided to abandon the Pillbox and play all their games at Lexington.

The Saints made the move did this despite a 1909 amendment to the state statute on Sabbath breaking that would have allowed Sunday games at the Pillbox. The team decided to maintain relations with the nearby churches by not playing on Sunday and finally resolved most of the issues facing then with the permanent move to Lexington Park, determining by this time that the distance from St. Paul was no longer as onerous as it had once been.

The Saints were all-white teams, as were the others in what was called "organized baseball," because of a racial barrier that existed until the 1940s. Some integrated teams existed at various levels outside the professional ranks, although mostly the game was completely segregated. Even before the formal Negro Leagues were formed, many all-black professional teams existed, sometimes playing against white teams, both amateur and professional.

The Pillbox in its final years was one of the local homes of a St. Paul team called the Colored Gophers, which played a series of games against the Saints in 1907. Both teams recruited outside players, including a couple of Minneapolis Millers to play with the Saints. The Gophers benefited from the presence of Andrew "Rube" Foster, the manager of the Chicago Leland Giants as well as one of the best black pitchers in the country (and the man who would organize the Negro National League in 1920). Foster was back with the Colored Gophers in 1908 and pitched a no-hitter over a team from Hibbing August 28.

The following year, the Gophers matched up with the Leland Giants in what was billed as the "world's colored championship." Rube Foster was back with his regular team, the Giants, but he broke his leg prior to the games in St. Paul, and the Chicago pitching duties fell to others. The Colored Gophers had Bobby Marshall, one of Minnesota's most remarkable athletes. A multi-sports star at Central High School in Minneapolis, Marshall became an All-America football player at the University of Minnesota. The Gophers beat the Leland Giants in the series, a victory that established their reputation as one of the best black teams in the Midwest.

The Colored Gophers continued playing at the Pillbox through 1910, when the ballpark was abandoned, hastening the demise of the team.

Through the years, the ballpark had found many uses beyond baseball, from speed skating in the winter to professional wrestling in the summer. The Pillbox site is now occupied by a laboratory building for the Minnesota Departments of Health and Agriculture on the north side of Interstates 94 and 35E, a one-mile stretch of freeway known as Spaghetti Junction.

Part 3 – Design Concept
What is the general concept for design of the proposed commemorative artwork? (Please describe.)

A plaque that tells the highlights of the ballpark and its significance with options for where and how it will be installed. The plaque could be placed in a concrete footstone in front of the building and visible to people on the plaza. It could be closer to the entry to the light-rail station.

Part 4 – Conditions and Criteria

How does the proposed artwork meet the Conditions and Criteria for the Addition of New Artwork? Please answer the following questions as fully as possible and attach the answers to the application form. Supporting materials for the answers, such as reports, data, or articles, may be included or cited with a URL link.

1. How does the proposed commemorative artwork introduce a new element of the state's diverse history and people to the Capitol grounds?

Many notable athletes played at the Downtown Base Ball Park, including Andrew "Rube" Foster, the eventual founder of the Negro Leagues and a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, and Bobby Marshall, one of Minnesota's most remarkable all-around athletes. Other local athletes who played at The Pillbox include slugger Billy Williams, who played multiple sports at Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul and was a member of many integrated teams in the region, sometimes as the only Black player on the squad. Williams also served as an aide to 14 Minnesota governors between 1905 and 1957; and Walter Ball, a pitcher who grew up in St. Paul and played for years on both all-Black and integrated teams.

Though the Pillbox existed only eight years, it represents much about sports and their place within society and cities at the time. As noted above, ballparks more than 100 years ago were part of the urban fabric in cities of all sizes. A shift in ballpark design and citing took place after World War II. No longer was public transportation a major factor in the location. Older parks were in parts of cities that had become congested, and the lack of highway access and parking was seen as a drawback. The trend became to get away from the core parts of the city and into open areas that could have copious on-site parking. In Minnesota's case in its drive to get major-league baseball in the 1950s, it even meant going to the suburbs with Metropolitan Stadium being built in Bloomington.

Baseball remained as the primary tenant in stadiums (the term more commonly used than ballpark by this time) with others sports – primarily professional football – being able to play there with gridirons wedged in. However, the configurations were designed for baseball, and football was treated as a second-class tenant. With pro football's stature rising through the 1950s and with public participation in stadiums growing, multi-purpose stadiums became common to accommodate baseball and football on an even basis. While they were functional, the stadiums abandoned the ambiance associated with baseball parks and became generic as opposed to the unique characteristics that had once exemplified ballparks.

By the 1990s, both sports had risen in significance to a degree that public entities built separate facilities for each sport. With it came a trend for baseball to return to the core part of the city. The opening of Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore is a prime example and is the model for the "retro parks," ones that are distinct from one another and that have features that distinguish one ballpark for another (in Baltimore's case, using the B & O warehouse beyond the right-field fence as a design feature). The location of this ballpark is credited with revitalizing the harbor area.

Closer to home, CHS Field in St. Paul has had a positive impact on the vibrancy of Lowertown. The Twins had moved to one edge of downtown into a domed stadium seen as unfriendly for baseball in 1982 and eventually went to the other side of downtown with a retro park that is considered one of the best in the major leagues. Public transportation is again significant at Target Field although the existing parking ramps, built as part of Interstate 394 construction in the 1980s, solve the parking challenges that had been a drawback for inner-city ballparks after World War II.

Target Field also harkens back to a time when stadiums had site constraints; it is between two elevated streets, I-394 and the parking ramps, and the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center. Unlike many other post-war sports facilities, the designers of Target Field did not have the luxury of expanding property boundaries.

On the other hand, most sports facilities today deviate from ballparks of a century ago with public entities building them rather than having them funded privately.

The Pillbox, in so many ways, represents the commonality at the time and the vast differences from now in the ballpark itself and also in the way it co-existed with the city and its surroundings.

2. How does the commemorative artwork activity impact the historic, architectural, and artistic integrity of the Capitol building and grounds?

The ballpark being commemorated is historic in a number of ways, from exemplifying early baseball in the area and where it was played as well as the aspects of Black players and teams, excluded from the mainstream leagues, having a place to play.

3. Has there has been documented and broad-based public support of the commemorative artwork activity?

There are other markers to note the site of other baseball stadiums in the area, including one to commemorate Metropolitan Stadium at the Mall of America. The project leader on this has also instigated two other plaques for historic ballparks. One is for Lexington Park, used by the minor-league Saints and also by an all-Black team at other times, in St. Paul. Another is for Nicollet Park, home of the minor-league Minneapolis Millers. (That plaque, which was on the site of a Wells Fargo Bank at 31st and Nicollet, is now being stored by Wells Fargo after its bank on that location burned down in 2020.)

Beyond markers for sports stadiums and arenas, the Twins Cities and entire state have many markers telling the history of various aspects of Minnesota's past.

Beyond Minnesota, markers for many types of landmarks are common, including for ballparks. The Society for American Baseball Research has a Baseball Landmarks Committee that documents commemorative displays and that encourages and facilitates such markers.

4. Does the subject of the artwork have lasting statewide historic significance for Minnesotans?

Yes. The history of baseball and particularly Black baseball in Minnesota and elsewhere remains largely a hidden history. A marker helps call attention to it.

Baseball existed here before Minnesota became a state with the first recognized organized team established in 1857 in Nininger City, a planned community at a steamboat landing just upstream from Hastings. Nininger City is closely associated with one of the most colorful pioneers in Minnesota history, Ignatius Donnelly, who purchased land and built a house in Nininger City with the expectation that the village would thrive. Some sources indicate that Donnelly was behind the formation of the base ball team, although no definitive evidence of such a connection exists., but it was clear that the team was part of an effort at civic promotion as the newly platted community competed with other nominal towns to establish an identity and attract settlers and commerce.

From the simple origins of the Nininger Base Ball Club, the game began taking hold in other parts of Minnesota as it achieved statehood in 1858, with the capital city of St. Paul taking a central role. One of the first organized teams in the city played on a common area close to the current CHS Field. Open fields were the norm for base ball then (when it was spelled with two words). In the 1860s grounds around the fields were constructed in large part to provide a means of charging admission and keeping out non-paying viewers. [The non-payers still got looks from adjacent rooftops, as noted earlier with the Pillbox, to nearby

hills and trees and through knotholes in the fences, the latter being associated with the ballpark built by Charles Comiskey near University and Dale in the mid-1890s.]

The burgeoning rivalry between St. Paul and Minneapolis was buttressed by the city's baseball teams, and the growth of the game taking root in communities throughout Minnesota. A statewide competition was held each year to determine a Minnesota champion.

Race could be an issue, and controversy raged in the 1870s when a team from Winona had a Black player and other teams refused to play against him. This player, W. W. Fisher, was from Chicago, and some made an issue of his out-of-town status. This all mixed in with the rise of professionalism, which meant a demise of teams mainly stocked with local players.

Minnesota began having teams in official minor leagues in the 1880s, including Stillwater, which included Bud Foster on its roster. Foster has been recognized as the first Black player in the minor leagues and in 2022 was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Minnesota never had a team in what are recognized as the official Negro Leagues (seven such leagues between 1920 and 1948 are now recognized as major leagues), but it had a number of all-Black teams as well as some integrated non-professional teams in periods extending into the Jim Crow era.

In 1948 Roy Campanella of the St. Paul Saints integrated the American Association (the minor league in which the Saints and Minneapolis Millers played). The Millers integrated the following year with Ray Dandridge, a star for many years in the Negro Leagues and the Mexican League. Dandridge never did play in the white major leagues although he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1987 and also served as a mentor to Willie Mays, who played for the Millers in 1951.

The tradition of baseball in Minnesota is rich. It continues with major- and minor-league baseball in the Twins Cities, and it has a number of teams in the summer collegiate Northwoods League as well as the many town teams with Minnesota recognized as having the strongest tradition of townball in the nation.

The Pillbox represents much of the grand heritage of baseball in Minnesota and its place in society.

5. Is the artwork respectful of the diversity of Minnesotans?

The purpose of the artwork is to acknowledge and respect the diversity of Minnesotans, as we recognize that diverse history of baseball in the state, even before the integration of the sport as a whole.

We will be aware of the implications of using the word "colored" with the name of the team and the name of the 1909 series. I will leave this to others with greater understanding of the issue to have input on the use of the word.

6. Does viewing the artwork provide a rich experience to broaden the understanding of Minnesota's shared history, heritage, and culture?

We hope that the artwork offers a lens into a time when we were further than we are now from acknowledging all Minnesotans as truly equal, paying homage to those who nonetheless would not be denied from enjoying their chosen pursuits while serving as positive examples to others.

7. If the subject of the artwork is a specific person...

The artwork is not about a specific person.

Part 5 – Funding

Is funding available to pay for the proposed addition and any related site work around it? (Please describe the expected funding sources and fundraising strategy.)

Funding is available through a grant from the Society for American Baseball Research and/or from contributions from individual members.